

Practical Process Roger Tregear

Why is process work different?

As in life, many skills are needed to be successful in process management and improvement and they seldom come to full force naturally, needing to be discovered, valued, and nurtured.

To be successful in process-based management there are many competencies required around IT and data management, statistical and financial analysis, process mining and modeling—the so-called *hard skills*.

However, much of the success of process-based management depends on the development of good interpersonal communication and relationship skills—the so-called *soft skills*. In much of our process work we are more likely to be arguing with another human than a spreadsheet or a modeling tool.

The skills required to have difficult conversations, to resolve strongly opposed opinions, and to deal empathetically with diverse personal challenges are regularly called soft skills. But they shouldn't be. Soft skills are hard.

If arguing with a database seems 'hard', try explaining to a functional manager that her department needs to make big changes to solve a problem in someone else's department (and budget!), or to the folks on the front counter that although the new customer management system is more difficult for them it will be great for their colleagues in marketing. Hardly soft.

Process work is different

Here are eight reasons why additional soft skills are needed to be successful in establishing and sustaining effective process-based management.

An extra perspective

Traditional, or functional, management is shaped by the organization chart and related activity is mainly up and down that chart. The process view adds an additional perspective looking across the organization chart and seeks to optimize the performance of cross-functional processes.

This requires a significant change in mindset which may be seen, by some, as loaded with challenges and complications. It need not be complicated or challenging, but to achieve that change of mindset requires special skills.

A change of values

Process-based management brings a new way of valuing and measuring performance. The dominant objective now is to optimize the performance of the cross-functional processes by which we create, accumulate, and deliver value to customers and other stakeholders. We value contribution to the end-to-end flow and not just to the isolated performance of a business unit (person, team, department).

This asks managers at all levels to work in a collaborative way with others in the best interests of the larger process. Such collaborative working does not come naturally to everyone, even in the best of times. In the more difficult times where urgent practical differences need to be resolved, special skills are required of all involved.

Who's in charge?

The addition of a horizontal management mode can create friction around the question "Who's in charge?" Is it the functional managers tasked with executing the parts (subprocesses) of the end-to-end process? Or is it the process owner appointed to oversee the cross-functional operation?

Without litigating the case either way here (see [this previous column](#) for my suggested resolution) we can say that any solution will require a higher degree of practical collaboration across the organization chart. This will be a new experience for many managers, maybe even threatening for some.

All the people

If you will forgive me for quoting myself, I have often been heard to say that "we don't want 5 process analysts, we want 5,000". By this I mean that we want everyone in an organization to be involved in some way in process management and improvement, and not just the central BPM team.

Be careful what we wish for! What if we do have *5,000 process analysts*? What if we have encouraged everyone to be involved and they have accepted?! That's a lot of people and ideas which can make for a rich and productive discussion leading to exceptional outcomes. It might also lead to chaos and continuous argument if we don't have the skills to listen, empathize, and find a way through for everyone.

The curse of knowledge

The curse of knowledge is a cognitive bias¹ that leaves someone who knows a lot about a subject unable to explain it to others because it is difficult to imagine the position of someone who knows very little about the topic. It is difficult to find the right (lowest level) starting point at which to begin the explanation, and then to proceed at an appropriate pace.

We process geeks need to be very conscious of this. Too often we might be raving about, for example, the joys of process governance and our audience is still back thinking "what's a process?" Same for anyone explaining or discussing process management concepts. Because process thinking is quite different there will be many levels of understanding—and confusion.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_knowledge

Not now, I'm busy

There is additional work to be done when we add the process view to our management model. Particularly in the early establishment days there are new meetings, workshops, and discussions. In the longer term there may be a net reduction in effort required as performance improves, and problems are intercepted before they materialize.

However, in the short term we need to motivate busy people to invest their time and energy in 'yet another thing'. Finding and telling the well-targeted and compelling story is a vital skill to get past this initial increased workload.

Measurement methods

The process view requires a new set of process KPIs and targets. Nothing productive can happen unless this data is collected and analyzed in a consistent and widely accepted way.

This data collection and analysis work can be simplified (the process can be improved!) and perhaps some of it can even be automated, but there is still work to be done continually and on time in support of process-based management.

After the initial high-energy work of establishing process-based management, enthusiasm must be maintained for the relative drudgery of ongoing measurement logistics. Too many process-based management initiatives suffer from enthusiasm fadeout, often fatally, in the absence of effective communication and leadership.

The language of process

Miscommunication due to different understandings of words, terms, and concepts is an everyday occurrence in process-based management. For many it's hard enough dealing with the new cross-functional ideas, but when that is complicated by unknown differences in understanding, we are tap dancing through a minefield.

Ideally every organization would have a well-maintained glossary of terms (better still, a concept model) covering all process language—and insist on it being used.

Responding to the difference

What can be done to develop the 'soft skills' required for effective process-based management? Of course, there are measurement tools and training courses that can be useful. As well, the very personal nature of these skills and how they are used means that they need to be observed and experienced to be properly understood.

An important way to build a culture that values these skills, and is proficient in using them, is to observe them in real life and absorb lessons from what is experienced. Look for examples of where they are used well, and not so well. Talk about those examples in work groups.

A simple and powerful idea...at the end of a meeting take five minutes and select someone to mention an example they saw in the meeting of good soft skills in action. [When you are ready for it you might also identify poor examples—and that will require enhanced soft skills!]

Using soft skills to talk about soft skills will develop soft skills!